POLITICS AND PARADOX: THE CASE OF AN URBAN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL[1]

Introduction

The alternative program described in this article would not have existed without a zero-tolerance district policy applied by school administrators to students caught possessing a weapon on school property. Nor would this alternative to expulsion be available to students without the support of both school- and district-level administrative leadership. The offending students were removed from their home schools and placed together in a smaller setting with violence prevention interventions unavailable elsewhere in the district.

The research reported here is part of a larger project dedicated to developing those interventions and assessing their effects (the Syracuse University Violence Prevention Project or SUVPP). Previous SUVPP reports have focused on: (a) statistical correlations between the project's pro-social skills curriculum and a decline in infractions leading to suspension (Burstyn, Davis, Douglas, Guerra, & Harris, 2002); and (b) students', teachers', and non-teaching staff's perspectives on the implementation and impact of the alternative programming (Burstyn, Bender, et al., 2001; Casella & Burstyn, 2002; King, 2002; Perkins, 2000; Waterman & Burstyn, 2003; Williams, 2002).

In contrast, this article centers on a subset of in-depth interview data provided by the administrative team members responsible for leading and managing this alternative school over a five-year period. Specifically, we address two primary questions in this study: (a) What insights do the perspectives of administrative leadership provide? and (b) What light does the evolution of one alternative school shed on the opportunities and challenges for administrators of other urban educational systems? But first, some brief commentary on conceptual framework, and some additional details about how and where this investigation was conducted.

Conceptual Framework

In recent decades, a number of factors have contributed to the growth of alternative educational programs in urban settings (Barr & Parrett, 1997; Birnbaum, 2001; Gold & Mann, 1984). Public perceptions of cities as dangerous places and national media attention to high profile incidents of school violence are two influences. They have prompted teacher unions (often most robust in urban districts) to press for strong student disciplinary measures, including the removal of difficult students from regular classrooms (Young,

1990). At the same time, family court and juvenile justice systems have shifted their emphases from the "reform school" model to a broader range of smaller-scale services and community-based educational programs for troubled youth (Birnbaum, 2001; Miller, 1998).

Interestingly, the proliferation of "get tough" policies and zero-tolerance practices for "problem" students has been accompanied by pressures to "leave no child behind," better serve students placed at risk, reduce school dropout rates, and increase the range of choice of educational providers for parents (Adams & Kirst, 1999; Barr & Parrett, 1997). Federal laws guaranteeing services to children with special needs of all sorts, and national level policy aimed at closing achievement gaps by color or socioeconomic status have also contributed to the proliferation of alternative educational programs. Those gaps are often most pronounced in urban districts (Kelly, 1993; Leone, 1990).

Sometimes alternative programs are identified by target population; for example gifted students, chronic truants, or students at risk (Barr & Parrett, 1997). Other times, typologies center on curricular or instructional emphases, such as continuous progress schools or rehabilitation programs (Leone, 1990). Among the many kinds of alternative schools, a "substantial proportion" seeks to serve students identified by disruptive behavior in their conventional schools (Gold & Mann, 1984, p. 4). And, according to Barr and Parrett (1997) dropout and dropout prevention programs represent "the largest number of alternative public schools in the U.S.," often serving students removed from other schools and frequently emphasizing "drug and alcohol education, anger management, and conflict mediation as central themes in the curriculum" (p. 74). The urban school where the SUVPP conducted its research served a target population who shared many of the characteristics described by Gold and Mann (1984), and Barr and Parrett (1997).

Context and Methods

The larger investigation of which this research is part was a five-year case study from 1997 to 2002 that included an intervention to prevent violence in an alternative school. This was one of seven separate interventions at sites across the country sponsored by the U.S. Department of Justice through the Hamilton Fish Institute. The Institute's mission is to "make schools and communities safer for learning" (Hamilton Fish Institute, 2003). The consortium includes school-university partnerships working to address that mission in diverse ways in middle and high schools in Oregon, Wisconsin, New York, Florida, Kentucky, Virginia, and Georgia.

At the New York site, the SUVPP partnered with the (pseudonymous) Garfield alternative school to develop and study a whole-school intervention

to prevent violence.[2] Garfield was part of a mid-sized city school district, in a northeastern state, serving approximately 22,000 Pre-K through 12th grade students. The Garfield program was established in 1994, with just six students and four staff members. As mentioned earlier, its genesis was a result of a newly implemented zero-tolerance policy aimed at providing safe schools by removing students found to be in possession of a weapon. By 2001, the program enrolled annually more than 100 sixth through twelfth grade students. Students could be sent there, after a hearing, at any time during the school year. They stayed for a minimum of one marking period up to a maximum of one calendar year. Thus the school had a constantly changing enrollment; it might begin the year with an enrollment as low as 45 students and find the number rise by late spring to around 90. The number of staff (including non-teaching staff) varied annually; in 2000-2001, there were 22.

Using a synthesis of material from Goldstein and McGinnis (1997), Gathercoal (1990), and Educators for Social Responsibility, the violence prevention intervention at Garfield consisted of a year-long pro-social skills and anger management course taught as a required class to the entire student population. This student-centered intervention was accompanied by ongoing professional development and technical support for administrators, teachers and staff, so that the adults at Garfield could reinforce anger management, mediation, and conflict resolution skills throughout their curricula and daily interactions with students.

The SUVPP's longitudinal study of these whole-school interventions and their effects employed both quantitative and qualitative research procedures. These procedures included surveys administered to students and staff, participant observations, and interviews with staff and students directly connected with Garfield.

The findings reported in this article focus primarily on the data provided by in-depth interviews with the five administrative leadership team members who were employed by the program between 1997 and 2001. The administrative leadership consisted of three different principals, one assistant principal, and one school counselor. Each of these five was interviewed several times at different points in the evolution of the intervention program.

Discussion of Findings

What insights do the perspectives of administrative leadership provide? Overall, findings from administrators, teachers, non-teaching staff, and students were highly congruent with respect to how Garfield's small size enabled close personal connections, redirection of troublesome student behaviors, a nurturing school climate, coherence around educational mission,

and integration of social and academic learning across curricula. In what follows, we begin by sharing a number of examples of how administrators thought about and voiced those positive outcomes.

In contrast, it was in discussions of the challenges and difficult times in Garfield's evolution where school administrators' insights diverged from those of other informants. Teachers', staff's, and students' perspectives tended to focus on individuals' struggles, social interactions within Garfield, and supports needed from building administrators in order to sustain a "family atmosphere." Administrators' focus, however, was more systemic. In the second part of the discussion that follows, we share school leaders' perspectives on Garfield's relationships with the rest of the school district, and on the challenges associated with funding, facilities, and operations connected to the broader political and social environment.

Administrators' Insights on Program Benefits

As the leaders of this alternative program reflected on the history, development, and context of what was commonly known as "the weapons school," the positive outcomes they elaborated were generally of three kinds: structural, educational, and security, with the middle outcome sometimes a happy byproduct of the first and last. We begin with their perspectives on the program's structural distinctiveness, in terms of size and students' length of stay.

Structural. Garfield's size began and remained relatively small. Small size and favorable student-to-staff ratios meant more time for administrators, teachers, and youth to come to know each other, to talk to each other and work together on a one-to-one basis when difficulties arose. These more intimate working relationships led to more meaningful connections for students, especially when compared to those in the much larger middle and high schools from which students came. As Liana, Garfield's second principal, explained:

> Because we are a small school and because I've had the time, whenever there has been a problem with teachers to student, or student to student, we make sure the child can sit and be able to say as much as he or she needs to say so they know they have connected, been heard and understood. It doesn't mean that they are going to be allowed no consequences. It means they have a voice. So often children tell us they feel muted by schools, by society, and that they don't get to say what they have got to say.

Iris, Garfield's third principal, elaborated that small size affects both "the class-

room and administration… you cannot attend to children really effectively and appropriately when you're taking care of hundreds and in some cases a thousand and over. In smaller settings, you can give them each the time and get to know them well."

These informants' perspectives on the value of Garfield's size are consistent with previous research suggesting that smaller school settings can decrease students' sense of anonymity and alienation, increase productive adult-student relationships, and lower the likelihood of violence (Klonsky, 2002; Learning First Alliance, 2001). According to Jackson (2003), Hill, Soriano, Chen, and LaFramboise (1994), and others, one of the most widely reported predictors of a student functioning "healthfully" in the face of many stressors is a relationship with a caring adult. Garfield's low student-staff ratio enabled such relationships to develop and thrive.

Relatively low student enrollment also brought with it increased opportunities and expectations for teachers to "try something different" in their classrooms. Iris noted that Garfield's administrators worked hard to hire and support teachers "open to what will work for the children and whatever flexibility it takes instructionally." Essentially, flexible instructional strategies meant active learning for students, small-group work, classroom discussions, hands-on lessons, and significantly shortened teacher lecturing. Carole, the Assistant Principal, described the kinds of "nontraditional" instruction that administrators observed and valued at Garfield as "hands-on activities and techniques that draw upon the kids' reservoir of experience to get them engaged in the lessons."

Prior studies of what makes violence prevention programs effective underscore the importance of interactive instructional techniques and experiential approaches that engage students directly in their own learning (e.g., Gottfredson, 2001; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). Similarly, educational leadership literatures emphasize that supportive supervision of such teaching practices is an essential administrative role (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2001; Sergiovanni & Starratt, 1998). Garfield's size facilitated administrators' frequent observation, involvement, and support of teachers' active learning strategies in the classroom.

Small size also enabled fairly nimble adoption of curricular improvements school-wide. For example, the SUVPP's pilot year began with a three-day workshop for teachers on ways to integrate violence prevention strategies into their curricula, and with a class that students took once a week, in which they learned a variety of anger management, conflict resolution, and prosocial skills. Because of initial successes with this required part of the curriculum, within one year administrators modified school schedules so that all students took the class every other day. As Liana (Garfield's second principal)

summarized the rationale for the speedy adaptation, "That class was so critical to making changes in students' behaviors… that we integrated it into the schedule just like English, math, and science." Less than a year later, additional funding was obtained to provide focused laboratory experiences in Art and Radio Broadcasting where many, but not all, students practiced the new skills they had learned in the pro-social skills class. It is unlikely that these programmatic and scheduling changes could have been integrated this quickly for students in a more typical-sized urban middle or high school (Fine, 1994; Jackson, 2003).

Besides small size, a second distinctive structural feature was that students' stay at Garfield was understood to be temporary. In Assistant Principal Carole's words, "We are not set up to be a long-term placement." Akin to a rehabilitative medical model, the program's intent was for students to be returned to a "regular" school as soon as they could, so as to miss as few social and academic opportunities as possible.

The relatively short duration of students' participation in the program contributed to a sense of urgency and mission among school personnel. As Iris (Principal #3) explained the interrelationships among small school size, increased personal connections, and the need to prepare students quickly for return to other schools, she emphasized the key role played by "the entire staff being on the same page philosophically for the way they look at and treat the students. The entire faculty share in and are invested in the same philosophy." That meant that, for the most part, administrators and staff were united in working to help students to acquire specific skills that would enable them to better manage their fears and anger, interact more successfully with peers and adults, and avoid common school disciplinary problems in the future.

The mutually reinforcing phenomena that Garfield administrators explained as "being on the same page philosophically" echo findings about factors related to high quality violence prevention program implementation (Gladden, 2002). More specifically, coherence about philosophy and goals creates a framework for coordinating educational efforts and enhancing the quality of school-wide program implementation (Bryk, Sebring, Kerbow, Rollow, & Easton, 1998).

In sum, as Garfield's administrative informants saw it, the structural feature of "temporary pull-out" contributed to the educational benefit of a climate of urgency and coherence around mission for the adult professionals in the program. Sometimes it also inspired experimentation with instructional and curricular modifications to better connect individual students. Of course, features other than program structures also yielded benefits in this alternative setting. We turn to them next.

Educational. Fundamentally, this program was a second chance for weapons policy violators. It was a place of last resort (or perhaps more accurately, penultimate placement) for youth who would otherwise be permanently excluded from the system. If these students' school behaviors could not be improved here, only homebound instruction (a monetarily expensive option for the district) or expulsion (a politically and educationally costly choice) remained. Garfield's administrative leadership and teachers were well aware of these possible next steps.

Coupled with the staff's familiarity with program participants on a one-to-one basis, this awareness of students' future educational options also enhanced the previously mentioned philosophical congruence about program mission and goals. That is, students were known and viewed as wholes, with both intellectual and emotional capabilities and needs. Iris (Principal #3) defined this "wholistic" understanding of Garfield's students as follows:

> It's academic "at risk" and social "at risk." Both are intertwined. We've never found one kid that the whole thing wasn't combined into one big ball. And we'll never know which came first the chicken or the egg. The reality is it's both.

Accordingly, it was taken for granted that students were multidimensional. It was widely known that their reasons for having brought a weapon to school in the first place were varied and complex. And it was assumed that social and academic learning were both important to students' success. As Carole (Assistant Principal) explained:

> The program here is multifaceted. I mean obviously we have the academics that we're all responsible for. But we're also making connections with these children to help them see things differently… open their horizons… and getting them to like themselves. Getting them to think of themselves as worthy human beings, worthy of love and capable of solving problems without violence…. Sometimes our focus can be strictly counseling and emotional support and mediation with kids, but along with the education piece… being held accountable for learning.

These administrators' perspectives are consistent with other recent studies showing that multi-layered violence prevention programs are the most effective (Dryfoos, 1998; Dwyer & Osher, 2000; Skiba, 2001). Supporting youths' positive identity development and equipping students with social-cognitive skills such as anger management and conflict negotiation can complement their academic growth in more traditional subject areas (Astor, Meyer, & Behre, 1999; Jackson, 2003).

Whereas many secondary schools are divided about the optimal mix of attention to academics and affect (Jackson, 2003), this alternative program

was characterized by the centrality of social development as a complement to intellectual growth and a necessary prerequisite to the acquisition of academic skills. Garfield knew its mission, and it was distinct from the almost exclusively academic standards-focused emphasis that characterized other schools in the district.

Garfield's educational distinctiveness was associated with additional benefits as well. For one, its uniqueness made it attractive to some categorical funding sources and researchers. Garfield's administrators frequently underscored the importance of these additional human, fiscal, and educational resources. Liana (Principal #2) described them as "supports [in the form of] ideas, challenges, collaborative strategies, and alternatives for the students." Iris (Principal #3) reported that the SUVPP violence prevention grant provided school leadership "not just money and additional personnel… but other people who weren't in the district who shared our philosophy and belief in children." Her assessment that "That was refreshing" suggested that external reinforcements of the alternative school's mission were valued and stimulating.

Security. Perhaps most importantly, Garfield provided a safe space for students. It was a nurturing climate described by administrators as being an "oasis" or "refuge" in otherwise unhealthy environments "on the streets" or, sometimes, in students' homes. Not all informants described their students' lives in such stark terms. But several administrators detailed social factors they believed to be contributors to violence and maladaptive behaviors among today's students. For example, Carole (Assistant Principal) lamented home situations in which physical or emotional violence were common ways of dealing with frustrations, problems, and disagreements. In her words:

> We try to say to the child, "There are other ways to solve a problem than punching someone in the face." And the parent is telling him, "I told you that if someone gets in your face you hit him." So you get the dual message… And if you're living in a household and immediate neighborhood or community that says the first form of handling a problem is to get loud, to get violent, and to hit, what are you going to learn about problem solving skills?

Similarly, Liana (Principal #2) reported that:

> Sometimes the homes are war zones…. Every once in a while I'll have a [child] come in and start screaming. I'll say, "Hey, wait a minute. You are with me. Sit down, relax. Do you have to yell to be heard at home?" "Yes, I do. Yes, I do." "Is there a lot of yelling going on at home?" "Oh, all the time; all the time." I said, "When we are here together, you don't have to yell." They calm right down then.

Relatedly, Alan (Principal #1) expressed frustration with the effects on chil-

dren of family members with limited parenting skills. Apparently, he had had many encounters with parents who "come in and say, 'I can't discipline my child;'" and with students "who were just left to do whatever they wanted to do" at home.

Study participants gave these and similar examples to illustrate outside-of-school, environmental factors they believed impacted student violence and misbehavior. Previous research and theorizing about effective urban schooling, however, urges caution about "explanations that seem to blame the victims" (Jackson, 2003, p. 580). Sometimes such explanations about environmental and community contributors to student behavior deflect attention from the institutional structures and norms of schools that contribute to youth disengagement and dysfunction (Fine, 1994; Gladden, 2002).

Nonetheless, in this case, administrative informants most frequently articulated negative outside-of-school, environmental factors as means of contrasting the culture of safety, civility, and non-violent problem solving central to Garfield's educational distinctiveness. Overall, when administrators defined the essence of this alternative program, it was typically in terms of distinguishing its caring climate and safety from other neighborhood or home situations in which students lived. School leaders considered this distinctiveness one of Garfield's key educational benefits.

Ironically, although a safe environment for learning was Garfield's hallmark, students had to have been caught possessing a weapon in their former school to be eligible to participate in this highly individualized and nurturing educational setting. They were removed from regular schools for the purpose of making those schools safer. So issues of safety are fraught with paradox in this context.

Moreover, Garfield's administrative leadership and teachers viewed most of their students as having made bad choices, rather than being dangerous or particularly "tough." According to Liana (Principal #2), "We don't see a lot of remarkably dangerous children in this program. Most of it is poor judgment and immaturity." Carole (Assistant Principal) confirmed, "Yes, they've made some bad choices and as a result, they did come to our program." The weapons most were caught carrying ranged from nail clippers to various kinds of cutters; seldom guns. They were rarely found using the weapons but, instead, were in possession of them in pockets, backpacks, and the like. Garfield staff believed most students' reasons for carrying these items: for self-protection rather than intent to harm; because carrying such items was a cultural norm in their neighborhoods; or because they had brought them to school inadvertently, forgetting what was in pants' pockets or jackets. Few students had extended histories of causing trouble, fighting, or being difficult prior to their weapons policy violation.

As reported in King (2002), "By defining the students as good people who had made a mistake the staff perceived that they could help them find a better way to solve their problems and thus avoid mistakes in the future" (p. 3). This perspective further contributed to the goal congruence, clarity of mission, and caring atmosphere administrators discussed earlier as Garfield's distinctive educational advantages.

Administrators' Insights on Program Challenges

The benefits identified so far point to opportunities for administrators in urban areas who wish to establish or improve their alternative schools. Our informants corroborated the importance, suggested in other studies, of small size (Gladden, 2002; Kritek, 1993; Ogawa, Crowson, & Goldring, 1999), and goal congruence, interpersonal connections, and staffs' understanding of students and program mission (Bliss, 1993; Firestone & Louis, 1999; Office of the Surgeon General, 2001). Most crucial, perhaps, for alternative schools were administrators' comments on the importance of philosophical congruence about the mutual reinforcement of social and academic learning (Casella & Burstyn, 2002; Jackson, 2003; Winfield, Johnson, & Manning, 1993), and their belief that anger management, mediation, and conflict resolution skills are teachable, learnable, and beneficial to students and adults (Casella & Burstyn, 2002; King, 2002). The principals at Garfield not only arranged for, and later continued to support, pro-social skills as a required course for all students; they made sure to maintain a whole-school approach to violence prevention.

Of course, readers will have to judge for themselves whether or not there are similarities between the Garfield situation and their own, to determine how, if at all, any benefits reported in this case might be applicable or replicable elsewhere (Heck & Hallinger, 1999). And, not unexpectedly, this alternative program's successes were often the result of, or accompanied by, significant struggle. We turn our attention next to some of those struggles, as they too may be instructive to other administrators.

Challenges of size and instability. Although Garfield's small size enabled close and productive adult-youth connections, it also made students' transitions back to more typically sized schools an onerous leap. According to Liana, Garfield's second principal, "Size makes a huge difference" in students' transitions from one school to another. In fact, administrators shared several instances of students intentionally repeating their weapons policy violation, in hopes of being reassigned to Garfield's more personalized milieu.

Another factor Garfield leaders identified as impeding the school's forward movement was that, because of size, it was easy for the district to

"move it around" as other schools' enrollment patterns and needs for space changed. This alternative program began with just one large classroom. Even as it grew, it always shared whichever building it was housed in with other programs or services. As Iris (Principal #3) pointed out:

> The principal of a school, a regular school, is not worried whether they are going to be here today and somewhere else tomorrow. [When facilities change frequently] How do I set up for science labs and equipment? All of that stuff is very important to me. I want to be prepared before, and not react later.

Garfield's physical site changed four times in its first six years, thus presenting extraordinary logistical challenges for administrators and stresses for all program staff.

Challenges related to status. The district's treatment of this alternative site as "portable" was intertwined with common understandings about Garfield's low status within the school system as a whole. After all, Garfield began because the district needed a place to put weapons policy violators—not a highly esteemed group. Its first two administrators were not "really" principal and assistant principal but Administrative Interns—a district designation (and pay category) reserved for entry-level and typically not-yet-fully-state-certified school administrators. Moreover, top leadership turnover was frequent: three different principals in Garfield's first eight years of existence. And, at least until 1999, most teachers were untenured and most staff part-time—additional indicators of Garfield's place in the district's hierarchy of employment stratification.

Status also manifested itself in the history of ambiguity about how the superintendent, school board members, and other district leadership and staff referred to Garfield. Both Liana and Iris (Principals #2 & #3) frequently raised the question to them, "Is Garfield a program or a school?" (This nominal schizophrenia is purposefully incorporated in the vocabulary of this article, since administrative informants' terminology about Garfield likewise varied.) The distinction between program and school is more than merely semantic. Programs are often less central, more temporary, and less likely to enjoy dependable funding in districts' operational and instructional budgets. Schools, on the other hand, infrequently change sites, close, or suffer radical shifts in funding streams. Programs are often characterized by high proportions of part-time staff and external-to-district revenue sources. Schools, however, expect grants-funding and part-time help to supplement, rather than form the basis of, their operations.

Overall, Garfield's challenges and treatment over time were more like those of a program than a school. Administrators proffered abundant examples

of hurdles in the pursuit of adequate permanent facilities. They cited perennial struggles to obtain, sustain, and regularize support for resources as basic as textbooks and instructional materials for students, hot lunches, supplies, furniture, and telephones. As Garfield's first principal (Alan) put it, "I'm a reasonable man. I had an impossible task to do…. I don't even have a shoestring budget. All I've got is the tennis shoe." As a consequence of the ongoing difficulties obtaining basic program supports, Alan became increasingly assertive in his approach to acquiring needed resources and, simultaneously, arguing that the district also should take ownership of Garfield's students. In his words:

> I just woke up one morning and said to myself, "Hey, you're not in an asking position, you're in a telling position. This isn't all your problem. This belongs to the district. They put me here to run this program. Give me what I need."

Iris, Garfield's third principal, used a different strategy to address the challenges associated with the alternative program's peripheral status in the larger system. One of her major goals was to transform Garfield into a school from which students could graduate, without limitations on duration of stay at the alternative site, or requirements for students to return to other schools. From her perspective, that change presented an enormous challenge yet was essential to earning Garfield permanence, stable funding, increased centrality, and higher regard within the school system. As she put it:

> My plans are to legitimize this school, so that it's not looked at as "a program," here today gone tomorrow. But to totally legitimize it, to make it a school. And not only for students to come here because of what they do or whatever [i.e. weapons policy violations]. But students who could be reviewed at the end of the year, much like special education. To see if this child is at risk and could benefit from the kinds of delivery system or kind of school, not program.

Her predecessor had made that path easier by fighting for (and obtaining) full-time status and improved employment benefits for many of Garfield's teachers and staff. Iris considered that to have been a necessary step to increasing Garfield's stature and stability overall.

Challenges and opportunities related to educational distinction and segregation. Earlier, administrators spoke of students' difficulties returning to district schools that were much bigger and less personalized than Garfield. But the challenges of transitioning back into the larger district system went beyond adaptations of size and climate. Fundamental differences in curriculum and instruction also made the return troublesome. According to Garfield administrators, in most middle and high schools in this district, students' so-

cial skill development was peripheral, rather than central, to teaching and educational programming. Academic learning was at the top of the hierarchy of priorities and missions at those schools—quite a contrast to Garfield's purposeful blend of academic and social learning. This curricular and instructional distinction spilled over into teacher development as well. Iris (Principal #3) explained:

> Our teachers appreciate [the pro-social skills] training, the help they get integrating those skills into their content area, delivering it to the students… knowing there's an expert on site to help them do the adaptation…. To be honest, with all the standards and the other training that's going on, I don't know if the regular schools could do this.

That is, in most schools, staff development time and resources were channeled into improving the faculty's understandings of state learning standards for specific subjects. The district's highest and clearest priority was students' achievement on state assessments in each content area, and that's where it spent most of its staff development dollars as well. At Garfield, the professional development initiatives judged most valuable by administrators were those that equipped staff to help students to manage their frustrations and anger and to problem solve in productive ways.

Thus, leadership's priorities for adult learning reinforced the dual emphasis on affect and intellect that made the Garfield program special and effective. Ironically, these adult learning priorities contributed to the challenges students faced when making the transition back to school cultures where they encountered adults with different priorities.

While, on the one hand, Garfield provided a small, safe, nurturing, and educationally distinctive alternative for its students, this "refuge" could also be understood as segregated, contrived homogeneity (Valverde & Brown, 1988) that exacerbated the difficulties of fitting in to other more naturally diverse school and neighborhood settings. As discussed earlier, administrative leadership sometimes viewed students' neighborhood and home environments as unhealthy opposites of the climate they worked hard to maintain at Garfield. Administrators took pride in, and were invested in sustaining, their school's special qualities, regardless of popular perceptions of Garfield as a dangerous or undesirable place to be. In these ways, the alternative setting's uniqueness fostered conceptions of its students as "other" and led to additional hurdles both in transitioning back to other schools and in elevating Garfield's status within the district's constellation of programs and schools.

Conclusions and Implications for Other Educational Leaders

In their descriptions and reflections overall, the administrators who participated in this study spoke far more frequently about Garfield's positive aspects than its challenges. Thus, at an individual level of analysis, our participants' worldviews may serve as models for both prospective and in-service administrators of other schools and districts. More specifically, over the five-year course of this study, and through multiple interviews at varying times of each semester, these administrators consistently conveyed hope, energy, optimism, and what psychological research would characterize as "opportunity-" rather than "obstacle-thinking" (Manz, 1992; Neck & Barnard 1996; Seligman, 1991). Clearly, cultivating the capacity for opportunity-thinking can be invaluable to individual administrators who work in the demanding and complex worlds of urban schools.

Implications for leadership at the program and school levels may also be derived from the findings reported here. For example, Garfield administrators' voices bring to life what a "whole-school approach" to violence prevention means in practice. It includes: programming for students that integrates social and academic skills; professional development for adults that complements student learning goals; and continuous reinforcement of a school culture that sees promise in every child, regardless of previous behaviors. These findings confirm prior research which suggests that multidimensional, complementary combinations of interventions—coupled with strong leadership—can build the coherence needed to successfully operationalize and sustain school improvement (Fuhrman, 2002; Newmann, Smith, Allensworth, & Bryk, 2001).

SUVPP data also provide vivid illustrations of why it is important for school leaders to facilitate and support alternative curricula, smaller and more personalized learning environments, and coherence around philosophy and goals, in order to address the special needs of students placed at risk. In this case, informants made clear how the more typical size and programming of other district schools could not consistently engage all students productively. In the current context of standards-based (and standardized) education and assessment, leaders' advocacy for programs targeted to helping non-conforming students may be needed more than ever.

The System Context

At the same time, these findings also point to how some districts both support and subvert school-based leadership for alternative programming. Beyond authorizing the establishment of the alternative program, district practice and norms left Garfield largely on its own, isolated from the mainstream

educational support system and relegated to peripheral status. This larger system environment placed extraordinary demands on Garfield's administrative leadership.

What linked all reported administrative challenges was the school's struggle for legitimacy (Abbott & Caracheo, 1988; Rowan & Miskel, 1999; Ward, 1993). Legitimacy as physical permanence was missing in Garfield's frequent changes in facilities. Legitimacy as financial stability was elusive, as evidenced by the program's perennial hurdles obtaining basic resources like books, furniture, and phone lines. Legitimacy as employment security left much to be desired because, for a substantial portion of its history, Garfield's teachers and staff were part-time and without the benefits enjoyed by most other educators in the district. Legitimacy as social status was compromised, as reflected in ambiguities about whether Garfield was to be considered a program or a school. And, importantly, legitimacy as centrality within the system did not exist. Findings suggest that students' transitions back to regular schools were primarily Garfield's problem to resolve, rather than a shared responsibility or priority of all schools in the district.

What are the implications of this kind of systemic context for administrative leadership? For one, such contexts demand strong political skills of program and school leaders. Garfield administrators employed the politics of persuasion, influence, and persistence to garner employee benefits, better hot lunches, and improved facilities for alternative program students and staff. They also supported and facilitated the efforts of Garfield teachers to integrate social and academic learning in their instruction, even though such strategies were less valued at the time, in the wider, almost exclusively standards-driven teaching of the district's other schools. Such actions demonstrated political savvy as defined traditionally in terms of competition and the exercise of power to shape the allocation of scarce resources and contested values (Easton, 1965; Lasswell, 1958).

Political skills were also evident in the more contemporary sense of collaboration and advocacy for what is possible (Ball, 1987; Blase, 1991; Dunlap & Goldman, 1991). To wit, administrative leadership nurtured alliances (Englert, 1993) within the grants-based university partnership to provide curricular improvements previously unavailable to all Garfield students. Also, these school principals sought out colleagues who could be depended on to help ease Garfield students' adjustment to other schools in the district, to broaden their base of support and assistance.

In sum, an important implication of this case is that program and school administrators require assertiveness and sharp political skills, in order to capitalize on an alternative school's promise while simultaneously ameliorating the subversion of that potential by the larger system's neglect. But what

about the implications of Garfield's story for district administrators and school board leaders? Clearly needed is enhanced top-level support for the value of alternatives for at-risk students, and resources comparable to those provided to "regular" schools. Why? So that alternative programs' success can rely less on individual leaders'/staff dedication, loyalty, creativity, or political savvy and more on systems of support for students at the brink of exhausting their chances for an education. At one level, the Garfield story told by administrators in this study illustrates how educators sometimes come together and make a way out of no way. At a systemic level, however, it also illustrates how challenging—and perhaps unfair—it is to be a different kind of school with only superficial support and nominal legitimacy within the district as a whole.

In many ways, the SUVPP partnership provided a support network and source of validation for Garfield that would typically be expected of the local district. But what might a stronger system of ongoing support from district administration look like? Consider, for example, students' transition back to regular schools after their time at Garfield. A more coherent district-wide system might involve the institutionalization of processes akin to those in place for students receiving special education services. Such processes involve team problem-solving, monitoring, and regular updates on the student's progress. "Transition teams" could involve Garfield and receiving schools' teachers, administrators, social workers, psychologists, parents, and appropriate others who would share information about the individual's strengths, needs, academic and social development. They could identify the kinds of modifications or services in the regular school curriculum that would help the transitioning student to succeed, support teachers in making those modifications, and facilitate personal connections with a counselor or teacher in the new school, on behalf of the student. Essentially, the procedures for transitioning a student back into the home school should be as clear and well defined as the zero-tolerance weapons violation policy and procedures that placed him/her at Garfield to begin with. Additionally, training for transition team members, as well as for all administrators in the district, could increase systemic awareness and responsibility for Garfield exiters.

Another example of what improved systemic support might look like would be the implementation of a violence prevention curriculum similar to Garfield's at all district elementary and middle schools. Garfield administrators and teachers reported transfer of students' newfound anger management and conflict resolution skills school-wide. After the pro-social skills course had been required of all Garfield students for two years, the number of infractions leading to students' suspension decreased by 50% (Burstyn et al., 2002). While termed "violence prevention," this Garfield curriculum intervention was only available to students after they had been found to possess a potentially

dangerous weapon. Surely a more proactive systemic approach would be to incorporate prevention initiatives before, rather than exclusively after, harmful behaviors occur.

Paradoxes, Politics, and Possibilities

Paradox is apparent throughout these case findings. The example just mentioned is one: effective "prevention" becoming available in large part after the fact. Another paradox is that the educational coherence around blending social and academic learning contributed to a personalized, nurturing climate at Garfield, but it also exacerbated the culture shock associated with students' return to regular schools in the district. Similarly, Garfield's small size fostered frequent, productive one-to-one adult-student connections. However, it limited students' curricular choice and access to extracurricular opportunities. And, as another example, Garfield's uniqueness made available to the school national research and development funding. Concomitantly, reliance on grants contributed to instability and uncertainty about staffing and programming from one year to the next. Thus, an important message for other researchers and administrators is to be alert to the complicated entanglements of benefits and challenges in the evolution of alternative programs.

On this note we conclude by circling back to where we began this article: the administration of a new zero-tolerance policy for fighting or weapons violations at school. From the perspective of one of the administrators in this study, that policy is seen as contributing to increased community violence. According to Carole, Assistant Principal, in the past, schools were known to be safer places to fight than neighborhood streets. In her words:

> Schools have always been a safe place to fight. You've got a nurse. You can throw a couple of punches. Somebody's going to break it up. It's not going to get down and dirty to the death stage. So it's a convenient place…. It's the place of choice for fighting.

In this light, zero tolerance policies can be seen, paradoxically, as pushing all fights onto the street where they become more lethal because there are few restraints placed on the participants. Though the data reported here do not permit either confirmation or disconfirmation of Carole's hypothesis, we raise it in hopes of encouraging future study of the intriguing and unintended possible consequences of school-based zero-tolerance.

Politics and paradox characterized the evolution of both opportunities and challenges in this alternative educational setting. The considerable benefits identified by program administrators signal promise and potential for other urban schools considering expanding the educational options available to their students. At the same time, the challenges our informants encountered point

to how and why stronger systems of district support are needed once such programs are initiated. Overall, we hope the Garfield case illustrates how important it is to develop partnerships that mutually reinforce the strengths of individual leaders and organizations to prevent violence and increase safety in our schools and communities.

Notes

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[2] In this article, names of all people, schools, and places have been changed to protect anonymity.

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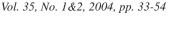
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